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SUBJECT: AVIAN FLU: PORTUGAL PREPARES FOR NEXT MIGRATORY SEASON

REF: A) 06 LISBON 724

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Summary

1. Portugal's Ministry of Agriculture tested over 5000 birds for avian influenza in 2006 with no detection of the H5N1 virus. A national campaign to register domestic birds for quarantine contingency resulted in over six million birds being documented on-line. Although Portugal decided not to vaccinate birds in general, it did vaccinate 275 wild birds near paths of migration. In addition, the Ministry of Health recently completed action plans for all six pandemic phases as outlined by the World Health Organization. End Summary.

Bird Testing Reveals No Evidence of H5N1

2. Ministry of Agriculture Deputy Chief Veterinary Officer Fernando Bernardo told Pol/EconOff that Portugal had tested over 5,000 birds for avian influenza in 2006. All samples collected were negative for H5N1 though tests revealed other strains of influenza (H5, H7, and H9). The majority of testing occurred the first quarter of 2006, with only around 300 tests between August and October. Bernardo noted that birds were randomly selected for testing, but that the emphasis was placed on four main resting places for migratory birds: the mouths of the Mondego and Tagus Rivers, the dunes of Sao Jacinto in northern Portugal, and the Santo Andre Lagoon near Sines. In these areas, the Ministry of Environment and the Institute of Nature Conservation collected fecal and pharyngeal swabs of wild birds being tagged and sent the samples to the Ministry of Agriculture for testing. Bernardo expected testing to increase significantly in the Spring 2007 as migratory birds return from West Africa.

Over Six Million Birds Registered

3. Portugal and Denmark are the only two EU countries with campaigns to register domestic birds, according to Bernardo. Portugal decided on registration in early 2006 due to the high number of Portuguese living in rural/suburban areas who raise birds for personal consumption. Local townships remain responsible for registering birds, and almost 87% of the townships had completed the task by October 2006. (Note: The deadline for doing so was the end of April). As an incentive to register birds, the GOP announced early in 2006 that the government would only reimburse owners for registered chickens, ducks, and other birds in case of culling due to an H5N1 outbreak. Bernardo reported that over six million birds had been registered through an online database, but he

believed the figure to be inflated by owners wanting to take advantage of the reimbursement scheme.

Vaccination of Wild Birds

¶4. Unlike some EU countries, Portugal decided against bird vaccination in general, citing the high cost and short life-span of commercial poultry. However, the Ministry of Agriculture did vaccinate 275 wild birds in December 2005 in two zoos located in migratory paths because these birds come into regular contact with humans. The Agricultural Ministry is currently debating whether or not to re-vaccinate these wild birds in 2007.

National Health Contingency and Action Plans Completed

¶5. Portugal's Ministry of Health (MOH) Director General for Health Francisco George outlined for Pol/EconOff the development of the country's Avian Flu Health Strategy, which included action plans for all six pandemic phases as outlined by the World Health Organization. In January 2006, the MOH released its National Contingency Plan for Pandemic Influenza. This was followed in March 2006 by the publication of the Phase Three Action Plan (the current phase where a new subtype, H5N1, is detected but there are no clusters of human to human transmission). However, the multidisciplinary team only completed the action plans for Phases Four to Six in November 2006. George hopes to post the plans on the recently created MOH influenza website by the end of January 2007. In addition, the MOH plans to prepare over 75,000 booklets on Phase Six (Pandemic Phase) preparations to mail to health care professionals at their workplaces. On the pharmaceutical side, the 2.5 million doses of Tamiflu (enough to distribute to a quarter of the population) which the GOP ordered in 2005 arrived in June ¶2006. Additional doses of Tamiflu are available from the private sector, but George could not provide an exact figure.

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Comment

¶6. The GOP utilized the past few months to cement pandemic influenza plans and procedures. Both Bernardo and George expressed relief about the H5N1's apparent lack of westward movement this winter season as opposed to last year's. While avian influenza has dropped out of the public eye due to the quiet flu season, both ministries intend to remain vigilant - especially when migratory birds return from Africa in the Spring.
Hoffman